Humanization of Work: Ethical Issues in Converting Ideology to Practice

Stanley E. Seashore
Institute for Social Research
The University of Michigan

This paper is to stimulate discussion and promote understanding concerning the ethical issues that arise from programs to humanize work and workplaces. The Bolivar Case provides an account of one such program. The following pages will give some collateral information and opinions, and suggest some basic issues, to complement the facts about the specific case. Four topics will be treated: The state of the work ethic in America; Some results from the Bolivar experience that enlarge upon the case report; The impediments to undertaking such projects; and, The ethical issues that must be confronted.

To explain this choice of topics I must mention that I do not think ethical behavior to result from interpretations of divine law (e.g., turn the other cheek) or of natural law (e.g., big fish must eat little fish). Instead, I regard ethical behavior to be defined and redefined continuously.

in the course of exchanges among persons (or organizations) who are in some way dependent upon one another and who stand to achieve mutual benefits if their behavior rests upon notions of reciprocity, justice, equity, and mutual respect. These criteria are elusive. They are not absolutes, but are expressed in ever-changing norms and standards. Viewed in this way, ethical issues are never permanently settled, although workable temporary arrangements emerge. Thus, the "work ethic", once rooted in religious dogma and the reality of harsh economic necessity, now is rooted in beliefs concerning the personal and social benefits (aside from immediate necessities) that accrue from being employed, being productive, and being cooperative.

On the other side, the employer's ethic has been changing from hard, short-run wage bargaining to include notions of responsibility for the welfare of the employee off the job as well as on, over his or her life span, and the welfare of the employee's family and community as well. New, changed ethical norms do not arise without strain. Humanization of work programs challenge the prevailing conceptions and operative rules for ethical behavior, and therefore are often profoundly disturbing to both employers and employees.

I. The Work Ethic in America

It is sometimes alleged that there is a decline in the force of the work ethic in America -- people are said to be less attracted to effective and productive work, less willing to accept the constraints of being employed, more attentive to receiving economic rewards as a matter of entitlement rather than fair exchange. The evidence offered seems to me anecdotal, episodic, and unconvincing. There
is evidence to the contrary, and I provide some examples.

Table 1 shows that employed Americans attribute very high importance to their work, and to the standard of living that it provides, as sources of their life satisfaction. In a national survey, people distinguished seventeen domains of their lives which, in combination, account for most of their variation in overall life satisfaction. Work is near the top of the list.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of Life Evaluation</th>
<th>Percent of Variance Explained</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonworking activities</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family life</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard of living</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savings and investments</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendships</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City or county of residence</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of education</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life in the United States</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness of education</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National government</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Campbell, A., Converse, P. E., & Rodgers, W. L. The Quality of American Life. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1976. The figures show the proportion (R^2) of the variance "explained" by each domain. Figures add to more than 100 percent because some domains overlap in their reference (e.g., marriage and family life).
In a number of national surveys, employed Americans have been asked the following question: "If you were to get enough money to live as comfortably as you'd like for the rest of your life, would you continue to work?" About 75 percent of the employed men and of the career women respond with a confident "Yes". This figure has been stable for two or three decades. The proportion is considerably higher for young people (about 85 percent for those in the 21-35 year range) than for older people. One may discount as he wishes for the possible bias in such responses to a hypothetical question, but the stability of responses over many years is impressive. The figures remained high even during recent years while the prevailing level of job satisfaction has been declining and the proportion is rising of employed people intending to quit their present jobs to find a better one. People other than those approaching retirement age have difficulty imagining a good life without working, even though they may dislike the job they have now.

In national surveys of employed adults, conducted over a period of years, information has been obtained about the characteristics of their jobs and work environments, and also about their degree of job satisfaction. The more satisfied people have jobs that, most importantly, provide some challenge (e.g., chance to learn, variety of activities, responsibility, use of one's best skills). The second most important factor concerns having the resources needed to do the job well (e.g., suitable supplies and equipment, enough information, help when it is needed). Of far lesser force in generating job satisfaction were the factors of economic reward (including fringe benefits and security), physical comfort and convenience, and good relationships with other persons at work. This regard for the
challenging aspects of work, and for the provision of conditions that allow effective work, holds similarly, although in varying degrees, for virtually all kinds of employed people in all levels of educational and occupational status.

Perhaps people talk well about the work ethic but behave contrarily. One clue lies in the hours they choose to work, when they have a choice. During the last five years, the proportion of employed people who work more than 40 hours per week on their main job has continued to rise. The proportion who choose to moonlight -- that is, to have a second job -- is rising and has been rising for at least a decade. People who are self-employed, and therefore choose their own hours, work more hours than those whose work schedule is set by an employer. These facts do not suggest that Americans have an aversion to work.

When asked how much effort they put into their job performance, 97 percent of all employed adults asserted that they "... put in more effort than the job requires". This may be as much a commentary on the prevailing low level of job demands, or on the poor design of jobs, as on the motivations of the job holders. In any case, the American people do not perceive themselves to be withholding effort. They respond similarly, although with less consensus, when asked about the effort given by the other people with whom they work.

If taken at face value, these observations about the work ethic in America suggest that the effective performance of worthy jobs is integral to, not antithetical to, the humanization of work life.
II. What Happened at Bolivar?

A humanization, or quality of worklife, program such as that at Bolivar should be assessed primarily with reference to the aims of the people on the scene. As it worked out, some of the early expressed aims were rather global and abstract. Different people at different times conceived various more specific aims. Outside observers claimed to detect some implicit aims that were never expressed by the participants. I think this state of affairs is characteristic of humanization programs, and for good reasons. Initial consensus on purposes may depend upon those purposes remaining somewhat idealistic and ambiguous. Specific aims come to be defined later within the limits of what seems feasible at the time, and the estimates of feasibility keep changing. Unplanned good and bad side effects emerge, and themselves come to be the focus of explicit intentions or aims. The events can unfold in surprising ways.

Certain global aims were early formulated in writing and agreed by management and employees' representatives. These were:

**Security** - The creation of conditions which give all employees who are doing their jobs freedom from the fear of losing those jobs, creation of a system in which there are healthy working conditions with optimal financial security, based on higher productivity.

**Equity** - Fair rules regulations and compensation; the end to discrimination based on age, race, and sex; and the sharing of profits based on higher work output.

**Individuation** - The concept that each worker is to be treated as a unique human being, rather than as an interchangeable cog, with maximum opportunity for learning and for practicing craftsmanship. The job should be designed, where practicable, to maximize the job-holder's control at the person's own best pace and style.

**Democracy** - Where individuals have a say in decisions affecting them -- starting with their own jobs -- and in which the rights of free speech and due process are part of the industrial experience.
An unusual arrangement was made, with The Ford Foundation subsidy, to allow some of my colleagues to observe the events at Bolivar, prepare an independent account of them, and to attempt to document the degree of achievement of these aims as well as any other aims or outcomes that might help to understand such humanization programs.¹ I will give some results from that work to supplement the information you have been provided from other sources. First, some "hard" data from the records maintained at Bolivar. The data cover a five year period.

**Security for Employees**

Freedom from fear of losing one's job: More jobs were created, as the employee roster rose 55%. Involuntary turnover rates (discharges, jobs eliminated, scheduled retirements, etc.) declined 57%, while voluntary turnover rates also declined by 72%.

Healthy working conditions: Minor accident rates declined 20% even with the presence of many new and inexperienced employees. Rates of absence because of illness declined 16%. OSHA accident rates declined 61%. However, not all was favorable, as the rate of minor illness rose 41% and the rate of medical leaves rose 19%. (Comments on the employees' reports of their own health appear later.)

Optimum financial security: The wage rates for hourly employees remained quite constant over the period, when adjusted for inflation, and the wage rates relative to community standards did not change. (Note that for the country as a whole there was no gain in real wages over this span of years.) The fringe benefit package was improved.

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Security founded on high productivity: Output per hourly employee-day in inflation-adjusted dollar value rose 23%. Net product reject cost rates declined 39%. The rate of customer product returns was down 47%. Some of these gains are attributable to technological and capital inputs. There was a significant gain in the index of employee productivity relative to standard, but also in the rate of unscheduled machine downtime. Supply usage variance (excess over budget) rose 22%.

In sum, the evidence is that jobs objectively became more secure, productivity rose and quality performance improved, accident rates were moderated (but not illness rates), and employee earnings held steady.

**Equity for Employees**

Equity is in the mind of the participant or observer, not in the objective records, so there are no "hard" data to report as to the fairness of rules and regulations, of compensation, and of discriminatory practices. Note that there is an employee stock ownership acquisition plan in operation under which the eligible employees can benefit from distributed profits and stock appreciation. Proposals for the introduction of a gain-sharing compensation plan (a negotiable issue) were brought forward but none were adopted during the period of study, nor since.

**Individuation, and Democracy at Work**

As with the case of equity, these aims do not lend themselves readily to assessment through the usual existing record systems of organizations. It was possible, however, to get information directly from the Bolivar workers. This was done through systematic interviews on two occasions widely separated in time. From these interviews we derived thirteen
indicators of the employees' experienced quality of working life, and 24 indicators of job and job environment (organizational) characteristics known to be associated with a higher quality of working life. Tables 2 and 3, following, give a highly condensed summary of some changes that were found at Bolivar through this method. These data refer not to all of the Bolivar people, but to a panel of individuals who were interviewed on two occasions (June 1973 and November 1976) and who consented to be identified so we could match the changes to their own unique exposure to the Bolivar program.

The impression given by these tables is that the areas of gain are more than offset by areas of loss or no change. It should be taken into account, however, that over the period studied there occurred also some unmeasured changes in the aspirations and expectations of the Bolivar employees, such that the later conditions were probably judged more critically than the earlier conditions. When asked a series of questions of an evaluative sort, the Bolivar people gave generally positive opinions about the beneficial impact of the QWL program upon the employees, upon the effectiveness of the union-management relationships, and upon the ability of their union to represent member concerns.

During 1979, the Bolivar management, with consent of the union, decided to discontinue the provision of on-site professional staff support for the program. The joint committee continues its work, but at a reduced level of activity, and could become entirely inactive. However, it is my opinion that the Bolivar organization will not return to its original, pre-experimental, condition but will instead incorporate in its normal activities the values and some of the methods of working together that have been learned. The emerging array of ethical norms and standards may prove durable.
Table 2

Changes in Thirteen Quality of Worklife Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gains</th>
<th>No Change</th>
<th>Losses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treated in a more personal way</td>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>More report of physical stress symptoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job involved more use of, or higher level, skills</td>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td>More report of psychological stress symptoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job is more secure</td>
<td>Job offers opportunity for personal growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working conditions</td>
<td>Less satisfaction with pay level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fairness of work load</td>
<td>Less satisfaction with pay equity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fringe benefits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

Changes in Twenty-Four Work Environment Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gains</th>
<th>No Change</th>
<th>Losses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisors more participative</td>
<td>Supervisory favoritism</td>
<td>Supervisors are less work facilitating, supportive, respectful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More work group participation</td>
<td>Supervisory feedback to workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More worker influence on task decisions</td>
<td>Work group feedback</td>
<td>Less satisfaction with work group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More adequate work resources</td>
<td>Employee influence on work schedule decisions</td>
<td>Less association between work performance and rewards received (4 indicators)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More work improvement ideas provided by employees</td>
<td>General organizational climate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of work improvement suggestions made</td>
<td>Less job feedback</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
III. Contracts, Social Norms, and Humanization of Work

It is useful to regard programs for the humanization of work as purposeful efforts to redesign the existing norms of ethical behavior which govern relationships at work. The Bolivar case, like most others, included explicit intentions to enlarge the range of "goods" (e.g., individuation) and "bads" (imposed work pace) to be taken into account, and to alter the weights given to the factors that enter into a reciprocally balanced understanding between an employer and the employees. Specifically, the aim was to address jointly some matters that seemed unsuited for the established bargaining, contract and grievance management arrangements, and to try out some supplemental ways (implicit contracts, oral agreements) to enhance mutual benefit. At Bolivar, it plainly was not a situation in which one party proposed to "give" something of value to the other without some expectation of offsetting benefits.

The difference between such implicit bargaining and balancing of interests, and the established contractual relationship, lies in three factors: (1) Most of the goods and bads to be altered are ambiguous as to the forms they may take, the scope of their impact, and their side effects; (2) Many of the proposed changes rest wholly upon voluntary acceptance and compliance, with little or no possibility for enforcement of the (initially ambiguous) understandings; (3) Some of the proposed changes defy assessment in terms of a balance sheet of gains and losses, of risks and potential benefits. For example, the paid personal time arrangement was committed without confident advance knowledge of its scale of application, its effect upon employee job stress, its effect upon product quality, its
impact on equity among employees, its cost to supervisors, its contribution to the quality of life for those who tried it. It was an act of trust and acceptance of risk by all parties. It violated certain established norms of behavior in the hope that some new norms would emerge to govern behavior in the redefined situation and steer toward collective benefit.

The introductory paragraphs of this paper suggested that social norms of ethical behavior arise from consensus among people (or organizations) concerning the terms upon which they will manage their real mutual dependencies. When the real dependencies are altered, as in the instance of the paid personal time program, and in the absence of explicit and enforceable contract, all depends upon the emergence of new norms. Such norms of behavior induce people to do things that are beneficial to the collectivity, to themselves, even though they have no certainty — only a trustful hope or expectation — that a reciprocal benefit will eventually come, either to themselves personally or to themselves indirectly through the maintenance of a more humane collectivity.

All this leads up to three observations. First, successful programs for the humanization of work are rarely bargained in the traditional sense, but rest upon some workable levels of mutual trust and upon the acceptance of some risks. Second, successful programs for the humanization of work depend upon the emergence, often very slowly, of new social norms appropriate to the objectively altered interdependencies and, as well, on the disturbing violation of some existing norms of ethical behavior. Third, it takes a long time; the Bolivar case is typical in that it has not yet "settled down" even after six years.
These matters seem to be well understood by many people even when they lack the words and the logical facility for describing them. That is why spontaneous humanization of work initiatives are so rare, and why so many such initiatives, whether by managers or by union leaders, are subverted. The risks seem immediate and palpable, while the gains, however great, are distant and lacking in certainty.
IV. Some Ethical Issues for Discussion

The humanization of work (viewed broadly to include allied notions such as "new forms of work organizations", "industrial democracy", "participative management", and the like) is widely accepted as a desireable goal. It is becoming widely practiced at the local initiative of firms, individual managers, and union leaders. In some states, and at the Federal level, the matter is being elevated to the status of public policy.

While humanization of work is variously approached and practiced, there are three common basic themes: (1) Collaborative planning and action between management and the employees and their unions; (2) Redesign of jobs and work environments; and (3) Enlarged areas of individual self-determination or participation in workplace decisions.

The motives of the initiators are often mixed. There are forces stemming from political or economic ideology, from social welfare values, and from old fashioned entrepreneurial self-interests. Occasionally the initiative arises from some individual's private impulses toward advantage, self-protection, and survival in a harsh world. The ends sought usually include improvements in the quality of work life for the employees, improved effectiveness in work performance, and accommodation to desired or unavoidable environmental changes.

The Bolivar case is unique in important ways, as all specific cases are, but it serves to illustrate some pervasive issues of ethics, and issues concerning the "work ethic", that are common to many such efforts to humanize work.
1. Work ethic. The idea of the "work ethic" carries a load of meanings, from its originators in an earlier century, which appear to be less pertinent at the end of the Twentieth century. Work formerly was often individual, physical, performed to time standards, quality controlled by the worker, etc. Under technological advances and some humanization programs, work more often emphasizes collaboration, work system management and control, collective action, surveillance of work flows, non-repititive initiative and ingenuity, and the like. Who now wants or needs hard work, long hours, imposed time standards for accomplishment . . . and evaluation of the work ethic in terms of acceptance of hardship, suffering, and inconvenience? Can we invent a new conception of the work ethic, and a new calculation of the reciprocities that are involved?

2. Gain sharing. Who "owns" (should own) the product of labor, of capital, of managerial inputs? As a society we are of mixed view. Congress legislates tax advantages to firms that take steps to share ownership with the employees (e.g., ESOP plans). The Profit Sharing Foundation reports some increasing use of sharing plans. But, some managers have been sued by shareholders for squandering potential profits on costly employee or community projects. When gains accrue from humanization of work programs, how can they most ethically be allocated?

(Note that in the Bolivar case virtually everyone appeared to benefit in one way or another, but the terms for sharing remain ambiguous, elusive, and controversial.)

3. Voluntarism. Many "humanization" programs, including the one at Bolivar, emphasize voluntarism. Still, a good deal of persuasion and (one
suspects) of subtle coercion took place in initiating and advancing the
program. Bolivar is by no means unique in this respect. Must volun-
tarism be imposed? Can a humanization program proceed without coercion?

4. **Role of experts.** The theory, value orientation, and often the
action intentions as well, in "humanization" programs, emphasize the
importance of the principle of mutual self-help. Experts, particularly
outside experts, usually try, in all good will, to do no more than encourage
and assist others in doing what the others want to do. Still, most humani-
ization programs do involve very influential expertise. Is this unavoidable?
What ethical problems arise when expertise is applied and the expertise
goes beyond assistance in social change technology to include the promotion
of the expert's own social goals and social values? How can we develop
suitable professional role definitions and ethical norms for such experts?

5. **Costs, risks, and benefits of social change.** Any significant
change in an organization is bound to carry risks, costs, and benefits,
particularly during the transition period. Ideally, the risks and costs
should be moderated, and should be shared equitably among people in some
proportion to their prospective benefits. In "humanization" programs, are
there some people, because of the positions they occupy, who are put at
inequitably greater risk than others? Some say that this is so for super-
visors and middle-level managers, and for union leaders. Note the advance
assurances provided in the Bolivar case. Were they adequate? Could more
be done?

6. **What is a "humanized" job like?** Most humanization of work programs
start with some rather fixed ideas about what jobs should be like. For
example, there is mention of opportunity to learn, opportunity for self-
determination at work, relief from onerous physical conditions and arbitrary pacing of work, etc. But not all people want the same things with like priorities. In the Bolivar case, was the principle of individuation realized? If not could it have been? What ethical considerations can help resolve conflicts between the requirements of an integrated work system and the surrounding economic constraints, on the one hand, and the ideal of humanizing work in individualistic ways? Where goes the priority . . . to the individual or to the collectivity?